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Greek Theater at Berkeley

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William Dallam Armes

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THE

# GREEK THEATER

AT

# BERKELEY

By WM. DALLAM ARMES

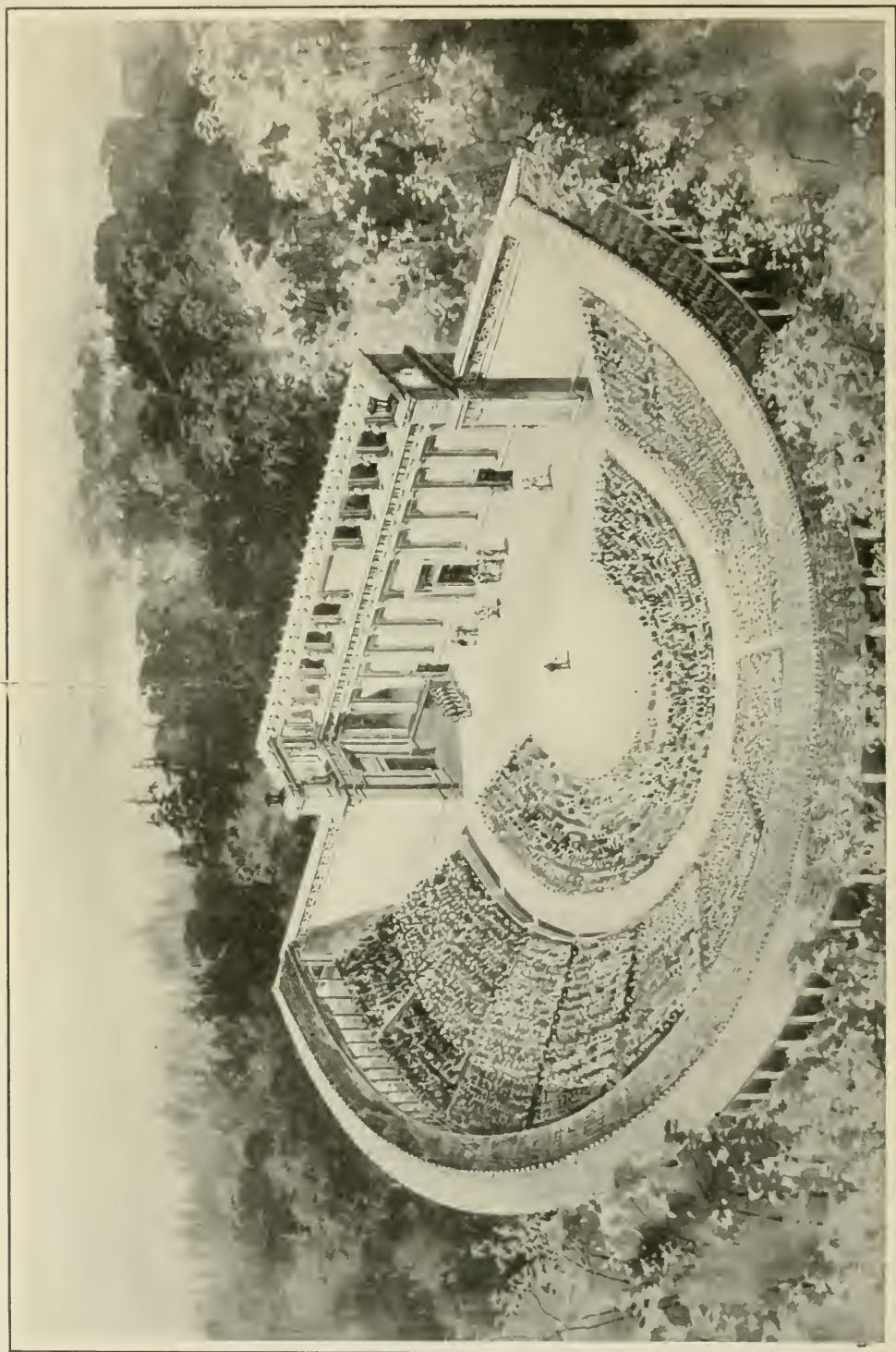
Assistant Professor of English Literature, University of California

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VIEW OF THE GREEK THEATER AT BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, FROM THE HILLS  
*From drawing by John Galen Howard, Architect*



—scenes from Aristophanes' "Birds" were presented in the original Greek by student-actors

## The Greek Theater at Berkeley

*By WM. DALLAM ARMES*

*Assistant Professor of English Literature, University of California*

DURING the last week in September there was dedicated at Berkeley, California, the first Greek theater constructed in the United States, if not the first built anywhere in centuries. Elsewhere, to be sure, sloping hillsides had been terraced and provided with more or less temporary seats, but nowhere else, it is believed, is there a permanent, modern structure that so closely approximates the theaters of the Greeks, one in which the constituent parts of a Greek theater can be recognized at a glance.

To some this Berkeley theater has seemed a mere reconstruction for archaeological purposes, bearing the same relation to the general life of the university as does the production of a play in the original Greek; to others, simply a huge advertisement. Both classes of critics are mistaken. While it certainly is a valuable object-lesson to students of art, archaeology, and the classics, and while its possession undoubtedly does add to the fame of the University of

California, the primary purpose of its construction was an eminently practical one. It sprang directly from a real need of the institution, and in the hackneyed, but none the less accurate phrase "fills a long-felt want."

In the first university building erected at Berkeley there was an "assembly hall," which, though it seated but four or five hundred, for years furnished ample accommodations for the faculty, student-body, and friends of the university on all ordinary occasions. Here Charter Day, Junior Day, and Senior Day were celebrated, and here the "Assembly lectures"—the predecessors of the present "University meetings"—were delivered, among the lecturers being Louis Agassiz and Charles Kingsley.

But from the beginning, this hall, which long ago was divided into class rooms, was inadequate to accommodate the throngs that, though Berkeley was then unconnected with the outside world by steam and electric cars, made the pilgrimage to the university



*—there was dedicated at Berkeley, California,*

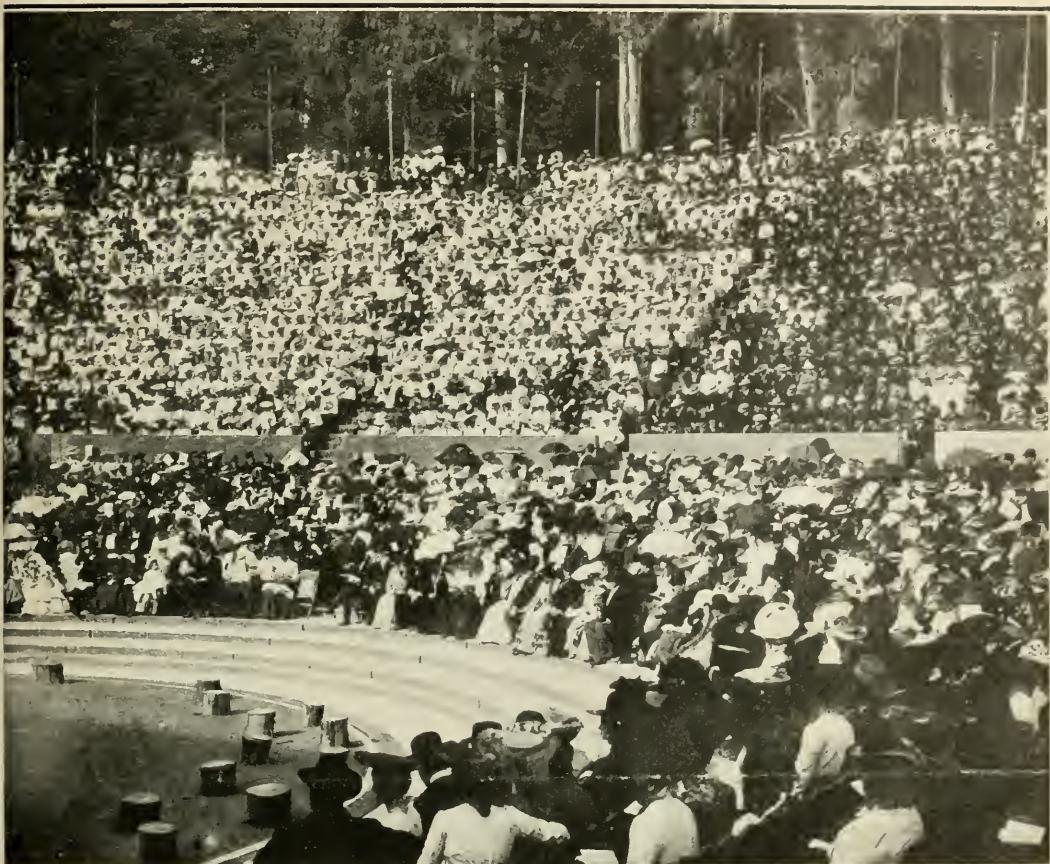
at Commencement time. In a beautiful little flat in Strawberry canyon, therefore, a temporary stage was constructed and rude benches built, and the Class Day and Commencement exercises were held in the open air, the California climate giving practical assurance that no rain would interfere. The building of Harmon gymnasium in 1879 provided for a time a place in which the Commencement exercises could more conveniently be held, but for some years longer Class Day continued to be celebrated in the canyon.

An innovation in the mode of celebrating this day, proposed by the Class of '91, however, made it necessary to seek a new place. In a grove on the slope of the hill back of the Mining and Civil Engineering Building was found a natural amphitheater from whose sloping sides a large number of spec-

tators could witness a performance in the comparatively level area at the base, and here the Vehmgericht of 1894 assembled. So well adapted for the purpose did the place prove that practically every class since has used it for the production of Class Day extravaganzas.

But a suitable place for holding the Commencement exercises remained a desideratum. The enlargement of the gymnasium, while it tripled the seating capacity, destroyed the acoustic properties of the building, and a large auditorium was one of the greatest needs of the university.

Impressed by the possibilities of the place that the students had long been using, President Wheeler called the attention of Mrs. Hearst to it; she in turn interested her son, William Randolph Hearst, and he signified his willingness to provide the funds for



*the first Greek theater constructed in the United States*

transforming the hollow in the hills into a Greek theater. The man for the task was at hand in the person of John Galen Howard, the university architect, and ere long the plans were prepared. Work was begun last February and by the middle of May the auditorium was so nearly completed that it could be used. A temporary stage was therefore erected and on May 12th the Class Day exercises were held in the transformed amphitheater. And two days later, on Commencement Day, the President of the United States addressed here an audience of eight thousand persons.

Next day the work of construction was resumed, and soon after the opening of the fall term the theater was ready for dedication. It was decided in addition to the ordinary exercises to have a three-days' dramatic festival, so on September 24th, after brief addresses by President

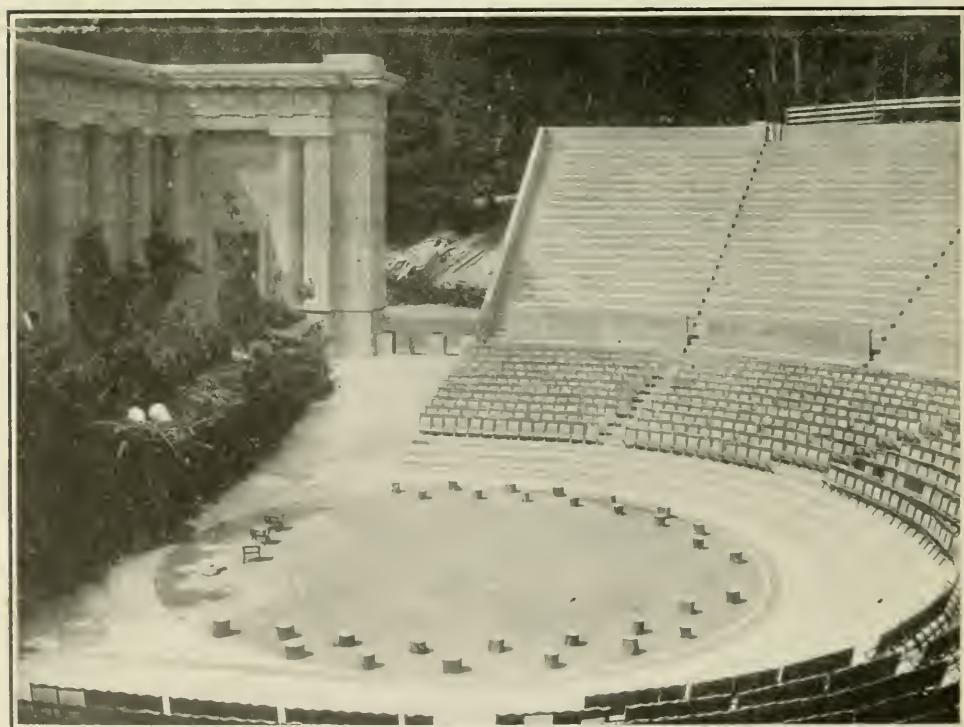
Wheeler, Mr. Weed, '94, who first suggested to his class the use of the site, Mr. Howard, the architect, and Mr. Hearst, the donor, scenes from Aristophanes' "Birds" were presented in the original Greek by student-actors; on the 26th, Charles Frohman's "Everyman" company, under the direction of Ben Greet, performed "Twelfth Night" in the Elizabethan manner; and on October 3d, students of the French Department gave Racine's "Phèdre" in French. Not only were all the performances remarkably successful, but the new theater proved all that had been hoped for, the acoustics in particular being surprisingly good.

The theater, which is solidly built of concrete, consists of two unconnected parts, the auditorium and the stage, with a broad walk between them. The auditorium forms a great semicircle

two hundred and fifty-four feet in diameter. Six feet below the stage, and at its nearest point, six and a half feet from it, is a level circle fifty feet in diameter, the orchestra, in which in a Greek theater the chorus performed its evolutions. From this level, rise, each six inches above the other, twelve broad steps on which sixteen hundred chairs can be placed. They are divided into six sections by aisles that slope gently upward from the orchestra to the diazoma, a broad aisle, on a level with the stage and paradoi (the entrances between the stage and the auditorium), that separates the lower part of the auditorium from the upper. On its outer side this diazoma is bounded by a six-foot wall, in front of which runs a concrete bench that will seat a hundred and sixty persons. Beyond this wall, which to give communication between the two parts of the auditorium has eleven openings, nineteen rows of steps, concentric with those in the lower part of the auditorium, rise more steeply, the angle approximating thirty degrees, to

the wall that marks the eastward limit of the theater. As each of these steps serves as a seat, it is sixteen inches high and two feet and a half deep. Eleven aisles with steps but eight inches high divide this portion of the auditorium into ten wedges that will accommodate four thousand persons. On occasion some six hundred chairs can be placed in the orchestra, so that the seating capacity of the entire auditorium is nearly six thousand.

The stage, which is elevated six feet above the orchestra and on a level with the paradoi, or entrances, as has already been indicated, is one hundred and thirty-three feet long and twenty-eight feet deep; and is enclosed on the back and sides by a paneled wall forty-two feet high. In the middle of the back wall is a large opening, the "royal door" of the Greeks, surmounted by an ornamented cornice upborne by voluted consoles, and flanked on each side by a smaller and plainer doorway. Each side wall is pierced by a similar smaller doorway and terminates in a massive pylon



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of the same width as the diazoma. The enclosing wall is enriched by fourteen majestic Doric columns that support a classic cornice with triglyphs and metopes, ornamented by bosses. The walls, columns, cornices, and all the ornamental details are covered with a thick layer of the best Portland cement, carefully finished by hand.

It would seem at first thought that the Dionysiac theater at Athens should have been taken as the model for the Berkeley structure, for, as the place where the masterpieces of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes were first produced, it was by far the most famous in Hellas. But two considerations made this inadvisable: its site on the slope of the Acropolis necessitated great irregularity in the plan, so that it was by no means typical; and it has suffered so much from reconstructions and additions that scholars differ as to what its appearance in Greek times really was. The theater at Epidaurus, which Pausanias termed the most beautiful in the world, was therefore selected as the model. It was built by Polycletus in the fourth century, B.C., and not only has never undergone reconstruction, but is the best preserved of all theaters of purely Greek origin.

But the model was not slavishly followed. While of great archaeological interest, a faithful reproduction of the Grecian prototype would have been of little practical use to the university. In the words of the architect at the dedicatory exercises:

Countless suggestions in the interpretation of natural conditions have been taken, obviously, from the works of classical antiquity, but always with an eye open, I hope, to the dictates of our American—our Californian—civilization. This building is not merely an archaeological study, though much study of antiquity has contributed to its creation. No line, no surface, no slightest detail has been fixed in its design without the careful consideration of all the documents to which we have had access in a spirit of deepest reverence for the past; nor on the other hand without a sincere and reasoned reorganization of every element (as I believe the Greeks worked with their antiquity) before it was permitted to enter into the completed scheme. The theater is thus a closely woven web of old and new, of traditional methods and of free design.

The arrangement of the seats in the auditorium of the Berkeley theater therefore closely resembles that of a Roman theater, as given by Vitruvius, for that permits a good view of the stage from every seat, which was impossible at Epidaurus, where the center of interest was the performance in the orchestra. The relative size of the stage and the auditorium at Epidaurus and at Berkeley is, moreover, very different. Though the theater at Epidaurus was far larger than that at Berkeley, being in fact one of the largest in Greece, the stage was much smaller. Seventy-eight feet long, it was but eight feet deep; and it was elevated twelve feet above the level of the orchestra. Whatever may have been its use in a Greek theater, such a high, narrow shelf would be of no service in a modern one.

As it at present stands the theater is but a sketch of what it is hoped that it will some day be. The architect's drawing shows it with an open parapet with clustered columns and caryatids crowning the stage wall, bronze tripods surmounting the pylons, wing walls running north and south from the pylons and closing in the vista from the auditorium, and a double colonnade surrounding the upper circle of the auditorium.

This is a hope, perchance a dream. But there on that Berkeley hillside for all men to see, stands a solid reality that awakens the admiration of every beholder but calls forth the loudest plaudits from those best acquainted with the extant masterpieces of Greek architecture. Shut out from the feverish haste of the busy, workaday world by its setting of somber cypresses and feathery eucalypti, it rises in simple dignity and calm majesty, evoking a feeling akin to that called forth by the temples at Paestum, so impressive in their isolation. Honor to him who gave this unique gift to his native state, and honor to him whose artistic susceptibility made such a gift possible. "We have but followed the suggestions of the site," said the architect; and this too "Nature has adopted into her race," because

The passive Master lent his hand  
To the vast soul that o'er him planned.









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